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Presented at the Dean Hopper Graduate Student Conference, Drew University

June 8, 2013

“A People’s Library:” Frank P. Hill and the Making of the Newark Public Library

“It should be known from the start that this is to be a people’s library, and that the struggling artisan is to be as welcome to its precincts and privileges as the scholar and the millionaire.”¹

So was the enthusiastic response to the news that the city of Newark, NJ planned to establish a free public library in 1888. This statement, published in an editorial in the city’s *Sunday Call* newspaper, reflected the progressive reformist ideal of the library as a tool of public education and universal access to knowledge. From its inception in 1888, the librarians at the Newark Public Library fully undertook the mission to advance the function of the library as a source of learning for all people.

That mission was evident in Newark’s first librarian, Frank P. Hill. An educated, middle-class individual, Hill is often overlooked in the history of the Newark Public Library.² However, Hill had laid an impressive foundation of library services upon which his famous successor, John Cotton Dana was able to build. He considered every detail, from the books chosen for its initial collections to the Renaissance-style building that became the library’s permanent home, with library users in mind. Hill’s people-centered approach was a testament to his vision of a city library which welcomed patrons of all walks of life, while transmitting Progressive concepts of culture and education. Under Hill’s stewardship, the Newark Public Library blossomed into a

¹ *Newark Sunday Call*. May 13, 1888.

² “Fifty Years, 1889-1939.” The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939. p. 8-9.

cutting-edge public institution that sought to bring culture, learning, and intellectual activity to a late nineteenth century industrial American city.³

No longer solely the province of gentlemen scholars and educated ladies, the free and public library at Newark served both the “struggling artisan” and the wealthy businessman, promising equality through education. In so doing, Hill’s role was more than a mere librarian; he was a public intellectual. Yet, in order to fully understand the significance of Hill’s achievements as a career librarian, the political, cultural, and intellectual context in which the library was founded also needs to be assessed.

Franklin Pierce Hill was born in Concord, NH on August 22, 1855.⁴ He completed his undergraduate degree at Dartmouth College in either 1876 or 1879, and received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Dartmouth in 1906. On May 17, 1880 he married Annie Maria Wood and had three children.⁵ Hill chose to be a librarian and acquired a reputation as a builder of libraries. He organized the libraries at Lowell, MA between 1879 and 1884; Paterson, NJ, the first public library in the state, between 1885 and 1887; and, Salem, MA in 1888.⁶ At all three libraries, Hill distinguished himself as a master administrator capable of turning any library collection into a streamlined, user-friendly, public resource. In so doing, he sought to provide an accessible liberal education to the public. Hill lived during a time when a liberal education was considered a pathway to acculturation and citizenship.

Hill’s talent at organizing institutions in smaller industrial towns prepared him well for his later move to Newark. Indeed, Newark at the end of the nineteenth century was a typical

³ Shales, Ezra. *Made in Newark: Cultivating Industrial Arts and Civic Identity in the Progressive Era*. (New Brunswick: Rivergate Books, 2010), p. 3.

⁴ *The Brooklyn Public Library: A History*. Brooklyn, unpublished manuscript, 1970, 2 vols., v.1, 195-204, 271-272. Brooklyn Public Library Special Collections. Brooklyn, NY.

⁵ “Frank P. Hill, 86, Retired Librarian.” *Newark Evening News*, August 25, 1941. New Jersey Information Room, Newark Public Library

⁶ *Brooklyn*, Ibid.

northern industrial city featuring several indicators of the “progress” that was such a part of the social and cultural discourse of the time. Observers often referred to Newark as the “industrial suburb” of New York City.”⁷ By 1900, the city boasted a population of nearly 300,000. About two thousand factories crowded along the city’s rivers, canals, and railroad lines in and around the downtown area. These factories manufactured almost everything, from ironwork, textiles, and metal products to leather goods and beer. Tens of thousands of workers staffed these factories and worked ten to twelve hour days. Thus, the city’s commitment to enterprise led to an often romanticized image of the industrious worker as a source of civic pride, later reflected in the library’s services.⁸

In addition, Newark’s extensive railroad system further indicated progress and modernity. The city had served as an important rail hub since the 1860s. Five different railroad lines connected passengers and goods from western and southern New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the Ohio River Valley to New York City.⁹ The city was also home to several famous department stores, including Bamberger’s, the fifth largest department store in the nation and whose owner, Louis Bamberger, built the Newark Museum, and Hahne’s, Newark’s other favorite department store, catered to customers from throughout the tri-state area. These large retailers were popular tourist destinations and competed with the likes of Macy’s in New York City.

As a result of constant traffic and burgeoning industries, Newark also had vibrant immigrant enclaves scattered throughout the city. These residents hailed from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Lithuania, in addition to the older Anglo-Protestant, Dutch, and African-American populations. These disparate groups adhered to different religions, including

⁷ Shales, Ezra. *Made in Newark: Cultivating Industrial Arts and Civic Identity in the Progressive Era*. (New Brunswick: Rivergate Books, 2010), 4.

⁸ Shales. *Made in Newark*. 7.

⁹ Turner, Jean-Rae, Richard T. Koles, and Charles F. Cummings. *Newark: The Golden Age*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 41.

Catholicism, various sects of Protestantism, and Judaism. As a result, Newark in the 1880s was a bustling, multiracial, multilingual city. Hill took all of these factors into consideration when designing the city's first free public library.

Yet, within this context of rapid industrial change and wealth creation, labor unrest and anxieties about the lower classes remained strong among the city's elites. The ruling gentry and educated middle-classes were often replaced in positions of power and influence by the newly rich businessmen of the era. As a result, in many American cities, these culturally displaced people found recourse in reform movements of various kinds. The library movement was one of them. In many ways, the library at Newark reflected the reformist aspirations of late Victorian America. Through public cultural institutions such as libraries, supporters and reformers wanted to bring liberal education and cultural refinement to the uneducated and increasingly foreign masses at a time when public education was still restricted. Libraries, in conjunction with public schools, were believed to be effective tools to spread both decency and democracy. Prominent community leaders, businessmen, and other funders of libraries wanted to disseminate appropriate cultural mores to the public with the hope of achieving social uplift and mitigating the threat of class upheaval that seemed imminent throughout Gilded Age America.

Although libraries had existed in Newark since the city was founded in 1666, they were typically personal collections of the upper classes. A subscription library called the Library Association was founded in 1845 where members paid an annual fee and users could check out two books at a time with no individual access to shelves.¹⁰ Although the Association allowed many more patrons to have access to books than previously, the subscription library was largely out of the reach of the working classes.

¹⁰"Fifty Years, 1889-1939." The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939, 12.

Finally, by the 1860s, communities throughout the United States had grown enough to support public libraries and many cities and towns moved to do so throughout the country. In 1876 a group of librarians met in Philadelphia and formed the American Library Association. The ALA was a leap forward in the development of the library movement because they shared ideas and moved towards standardization of library methods. Some of the most prestigious names in librarianship were members of the ALA, including Melvil Dewey, the inventor of the Dewey Decimal System, and John Cotton Dana, the second librarian at Newark and founder of the Newark Museum.

By the 1880s state legislatures across the nation approved bills encouraging the establishment of libraries. In 1884, the New Jersey state legislature passed such a bill authorizing the establishment of public libraries with municipal funds, and by 1888, the people of Newark voted to establish its own free public library.¹¹ A board of trustees was quickly formed, comprising Mayor Joseph E. Haynes, Superintendent of Public Instruction William N. Barringer, and several prominent local businessmen.¹² With the approval of its citizens and an administrative apparatus in place, Newark immediately set to work.

The first task was to select a librarian worthy to lead the charge. The board of trustees elected Frank P. Hill, who was then the librarian in Salem, MA, as the city's first public librarian in 1889. Hill's role at the library was akin to that of a modern executive director of a non-profit institution. He had full authority to determine the composition of the library's collections, the manner in which the reading public had access to those collections, and to oversee the staff that assisted him in his endeavors.

¹¹"Fifty Years, 1889-1939." The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939. p. 12

¹² "Fifty Years", 6.

Upon his appointment, Hill set to work with gusto. The new library took up residence in space rented from the Library Association's Park Theatre on West Park Street.¹³ When the Association eventually closed later that year in favor of the new free public library, Hill had first pick over its holdings. He bought 10,000 hand-picked volumes from the Association. Those initial 10,000 volumes became the backbone of the modern library he was to build in the subsequent years. He and his staff spent months meticulously cataloguing the books and trained them all in that system. Further, Hill established the detailed book check out system that became known as the Newark system and adopted nationally.

Then Hill did something truly radical: he implemented an open-shelving system for all non-fiction books. In the 1880s and 1890s, only two other libraries in the country had open-shelving systems, Cleveland and Minneapolis.¹⁴ For the most part, the majority of librarians across the country believed that open-shelves invited book theft, damage, and even idle reading.¹⁵ Yet, with the approval of the board of trustees, Hill quietly adopted the practice and the open shelves became a popular feature.

Hill also worked in conjunction with local public schools to provide traveling library collections for use by students and teachers, a relationship that grew and strengthened over time. The library also featured extended hours from 9am to 8:30 pm on weekdays, while the reading room was open from 9am to 10pm on weekdays, 2pm to 9pm on Sundays, and 9am to 12 midnight on holidays, except for the Fourth of July and Christmas Day.¹⁶ Special services for children, such as a designated children's reading room, were made to encourage a love of

¹³"Fifty Years, 1889-1939." The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939, 4.

¹⁴ "Fifty Years" p. 7

¹⁵ *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920*. (London: The Free Press, 1979), 4.

¹⁶ Finding List of the Free Public Library of Newark, NJ. 1893, vi.

learning at an early age. All of these measures were implemented in order to reach as many segments of Newark's population as possible, particularly the working classes and their children.

However, despite this seemingly liberal attitude toward information access, like any typical Gilded Age librarian, Hill had no qualms about censorship. As a general rule, certain books that were deemed inappropriate for public consumption were restricted for use only in the library or removed from circulation altogether.¹⁷ For example, in 1895, Hill and the library Book Committee recommended that the works of Oscar Wilde be removed from the shelves.¹⁸ This was almost certainly due to the scandal surrounding Wilde's controversial trials that had begun that same year in London. In effect, professional librarians of the age had the power to determine what was tasteful, useful, and even socially correct reading materials for the public.

The public library at Newark had become quite popular by the 1890s. Book circulation exceeded 200,000 annually and new books were regularly acquired. However, the increased demand also meant that the library quickly consumed space. Eventually, Hill approached the board of trustees and made the case for a brand new library building. The trustees were persuaded and approved a new library edifice specifically with public funds in 1897. The library symbolized a triumph of sorts for intellectualism in a city that was more well-known for its manufactures than for its cultural riches. This achievement also established Hill as an influential public figure in Newark through his library advocacy.

During this period, Hill's capacity for planning and management was brought to the fore. Hill and the board of trustees launched a search for the perfect location for the library. Eventually, they settled on the old Masonic building on Washington Park and Broad Street. It

¹⁷ *Finding List of the Free Public Library*. Newark: A.J. Hardham Printer and Binder, 1893, v.

¹⁸ Trustee Board Minutes. The Newark Public Library. 1888-1897.

was believed that the location was centrally situated and accessible for most visitors by car, trolley, and train.

Immediately, Hill sent requests for building plans to 39 prestigious architectural firms.¹⁹ Philadelphia architects Rankin and Kellogg submitted the winning design. The plans were for an Italian Renaissance palazzo with a marble facade and a marble central staircase. The proposed building was a copy of the fifteenth century Strozzi palazzo in Florence, Italy.²⁰ The building represented the Beaux Arts architectural style and was a manifestation of the City Beautiful movement that left its mark on every major city in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, the location provided ample space for the beautiful building that would occupy the north corner of Washington Park. Indeed, the city of Newark had received a true palace for its intellectual and cultural center. Once the location and the design were agreed upon, work commenced on the building soon after.

Hill expanded on the work he had begun with the Library Association in the new building as the new library was being built. Though palatial and elegant, the library building was also practical. The new structure featured electric lighting, conference and meeting rooms, and a sophisticated boiler system. A book bindery room was included so that worn or damaged books can be repaired in-house. Open stacks were preserved, but fiction novels were still kept separately from the public. The dime novels of the era were in high demand by Newark's reading public and Hill made sure there were extra copies of the most popular books available, another innovation Hill introduced to Newark. Books on manufacturing, scientific training, and city directories were added for the benefit of the worker and the businessman. Moreover, Hill developed a reference desk system and a phone answering service that allowed patrons to ask

¹⁹"Fifty Years, 1889-1939." The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939, 8.

²⁰"Architectural History of the Newark Public Library." The Newark Public Library, Newark, NJ. <http://www.npl.org/Pages/AboutLibrary/NPLhistory.html>. 5 June, 2013.

questions to trained staff before making a trip to the library. Through it all, Hill ensured that the best services were available to all of Newark's citizens regardless of age, station, or occupation.

As a result of Hill's careful planning, the Free Public Library at Newark was finally opened on March 14, 1901. Newark's political, business, and religious leaders attended the opening festivities. Residents marveled at the luxurious building and its many amenities on par with the likes of the Boston Public Library. Journalists described the marble and gilt building as a "palace." City officials were thrilled that Newark had an institution that embodied the spirit of progress. Overall, the new building was enthusiastically received by the city it was to serve.

After the new library building was completed in 1901, Hill resigned that same year to take the position of chief librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library for an annual salary of \$4,000. In the interim, assistant librarian Beatrice Winsor served as acting librarian. The board of trustees decided to hire John Cotton Dana, a native of Vermont and librarian of the Springfield, MA library, to take Hill's place. A maverick of sorts in the library world, in his first report to the trustees in 1902, Dana said of the library,

This beautiful library is the first of the great and suitably adorned public buildings in which Newark is beginning to assert her claim to a right to stand among the great municipalities in the country... We have come to think of the public library of a city as the center of the best of its non-political, non-sectarian, democratic, social and educational spirit.²¹

Here, the mission of the public library in American society, as imagined by a librarian, could not have been clearer. The library in the Progressive Era was meant to cultivate education and foster civic-mindedness among its citizens, and the librarian was responsible for facilitating those goals.

Hill's move to Brooklyn yielded great rewards. True to form, he launched a vigorous campaign of reorganization and expansion of the library for which he had become an expert. He

²¹"Fifty Years, 1889-1939." The Public Library of Newark, NJ, 1939, 8.

carried out a catalogue reorganization and revamped the services that were offered at the Brooklyn Library. Hill also oversaw the purchase of a library car for the travel of the librarian on official business to the different branches. He also encouraged the professional development of his staff through education and attending library conferences, increased the number of branches and staff, traveled abroad to acquire books, and gave lectures to library schools across the country. In 1904, Hill achieved another great career milestone when he was elected president of the national American Library Association. As libraries became a permanent fixture in American society, he routinely encouraged libraries to adopt more modern practices and services to adapt to changing demands of its patrons.

Hill spent a total of 25 years at Brooklyn until his retirement at the age of 75, but continued to serve as a consultant until his death in 1941 at age 86. Though scarcely remembered today, his pioneering work in libraries was very influential on the institutions and librarians that came after him. During his lifetime, Hill was indeed regarded as a public intellectual. The philosophy of public learning is Hill's enduring legacy. His work in Newark illustrated the extent to which librarians determined the scale and scope of services offered by the library during the reform era. Public libraries across the country still seek to cater to its patrons through changing times. Although the Newark Public Library's founding story bears similarities to other well-known public libraries founded around the same time, the library at Newark was significant because of the key innovations in library services that Hill pioneered. Through library services carefully designed to reach the public, Hill successfully established an institution that endures today.

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